

WASTE MINIMIZATION IN THE HEALTHCARE INDUSTRY

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SUMMARY

Hospitals dispose of about 2 million tons of waste annually, thereby contributing to the nation's waste disposal problem. Some hospitals have found that developing and implementing a waste minimization program not only supports environmental protection but also enhances occupational safety, reduces costs and liabilities, and improves community relations.

Background

Environmental regulations on medical waste incineration have become more stringent at the same time as landfill capacities are diminishing in many parts of the country. These two circumstances are leading many healthcare facilities to reevaluate their medical waste generation and disposal practices. Although the typical healthcare waste stream can include infectious, radioactive, and hazardous waste, the bulk of such waste streams is composed of non-infectious, non-hazardous solid waste.

Objective

The goal of this report is to educate hospitals about waste minimization approaches that are available to them. In particular, the report aims to identify electrotechnology opportunities for waste minimization whenever possible.

Approach

This resource guide presents basic principles of waste minimization, describes the typical waste stream from healthcare facilities, discusses general approaches and specific options for waste minimization in healthcare, and provides an extensive list of references and other resources. Some electrotechnology opportunities are identified in the report. Sample questions for hospital personnel that may be asked by utility representatives in order to stimulate interest in waste minimization are provided in the appendix.

Results

The report suggests two basic approaches to waste minimization—source reduction, and recycling. Source reduction is any activity that reduces or eliminates the generation of waste at the source itself. Recycling refers to the use, reuse, or reclamation of materials from a waste stream.